PLATTERS

STEPPENWOLF: Skullduggery (Epic).

YOU BETTER sit down while I tell you this. Steppenwolf are alive and well . . . don't panic . . . and they're reformed characters.

Well, up to a point, anyway.

There's still a lot of Canadian thuggery in "Skullduggery", but at least it's not quite like being beaten over the head with a blunt instrument.

Somehow they've survived all the old rough-house radicalism and biker boogie, and far from being on the verge of extinction towards which the "Monster" was wallowing with Free-style protracted death throes, this band is positively healthy.

The elements that remain from the period that immortalised the Wolf as originators of the foremost standard in white American rock, "Born To Be Wild", are singer John Kay, drummer Jerry Edmonton and bassist George Biondi.

Kay, of course, was the sound of Steppenwolf, and his beefy vocals remain as distinctive as ever.

The other major defining factor was probably their use of Goldy McJohn's claustrophobic organ sound, and that dubious asset has been retained courtesy of Wayne Cook.

Edmonton and Biondi form a redoubtable partnership immaculately co-ordinated. Edmonton's drumming is crisp, and peerless in its sensitive attack. Biondi's bass follows him faithfully, pulling off a few death-defying stunts, and very occasionally falling foul of its own ambition.

New guitarist Bobby Cochran is now a major contributor, driving the band from the front with electric power, and bagging the credit for the title track, a blazing hard rock song and by far the best on the album.

From there it's into Eclectic City, each track stamped with Steppenwolf's calm strength.

Junior Walker's "Roadrunner' features a nice guitar part, though it's disconcerting to hear Kay rasping out Walker's miraged vocal line from the depths of his Johnny Cash boots.

The second side isn't quite as good: a rocking funk song, an even more trite piece of laid-back philosophising, an okay but unmemorable rocker, and an instrumental based around that ingenious flurried guitar chord style I first recall on King Crimson's "Islands."

If "Skullduggery" is released as a single, that's the best bet. But it's good to know that the Steppenwolf is still dangerous.

Phil McNeill

BLACKMORE'S RAINBOW Oyster (Purple)

RITCHIE BLACKMORE, the world's loudest musician, sees an amazing new role for himself—as a medieval minstrel.

Hard to believe, right? Like Lou Reed campaigning in support of Real Ale: or George Harrison opting for atheism; or Tony Blackburn playing music; or Bob Harris shouting.

Well there it is in black and white. "An interest in medieval music . . . reflected in the Rainbow sound," says the press handout. "Many of the songs make use of medieval modes."

You gotta be joking. If Ritchie had to get the Sword out if the Stone, you can be sure he'd use a pneumatic drill.

Blackmore pours out the notes like burning oil from battlements. The band's menace suggests the rack rather than the maypole. Their unhinged attack is enough to dissolve the monasteries all over again. The sound is fat, powerful and brutish, like Henry the Eighth. Domesday Book? Doomsday machine, more like.

Medieval modes or not, the important thing is that with one album, Blackmore has transcended anything he did with Deep Purple.

It was Blackmore, with Ian Paice, who kept Deep Purple from being Shallow Sepia. Paice is sadly still with Purple, but on hand (and feet) is the great Cozy Powell, hammering away like the sort of octopus that could inspire a new Peter Benchley bestseller.

The combination is the hottest heavy in years. Lots of snarling riffs snapping at you, compelling, ferocious presence

Blackmore is never gonna be a new Hendrix. He's not into that sort of frenzied inspiration. It's a sense of dramatic effect and dynamics that he's built his reputation on, and those instincts have rarely been put to better use than here.

"Stargazer" is the track that says it all, taking up half of one side, with a satanic majesty and a perverse epic grandeur that make it a classic.

Blackmore turns in one of his most stunning solos on "Stargazer", precise, calculated, soaring and shimmering over the melee. And the song thunders for the exits with the Munich Philharmonic Orchestra taking up the riff. Well done Koncert Meister Fritz Sonneleitner, you and the boys sound just like a rampaging synthesiser. It's amazing what they can do with orchestras these days.

Not content with one gold-plated monster cut, Rainbow turn to "A Light in the Dark," the sort of crazed, flat-out blitzkreig the Purple tried for on "Machine Head". When this baby rumbles out of the speakers, there's not a grey cell left intact within a five-mile radius. No matter. Who needs grey cells to review this kind of mind-mangler?

Rainbow is different to Purple, and it's not just the range of musical colours they produce. Most of those are varying shades of black, anyway. What this band have created is a bad guys' mutant of orchestral rock, the perfect antidote to the pious mysticism of Yes and other yesmen. Proof at last that rock music doesn't have to be twee to be ambitious.

Bob Edmands

RITCHIE BLACKMORE: Medieval minstrel?